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## Report

### **CercleS Survey: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Language Teaching in Higher Education**

#### **Summary of the initial findings of outcomes presented in the CercleS webinar of 30 June 2021**

#### **A. Survey overview**

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##### **Research goal**

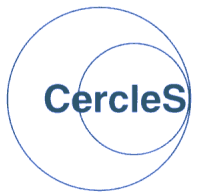
- identifying the conditions and forms of delivery of language teaching and learning in Higher Education (HE) during the COVID-19 pandemic;
  - defining quality criteria of the different formats of language teaching and learning;
  - making policy;
  - informing future planning of CercleS training and development events.
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##### **Survey structure**

- 4 sections:
    - demographic information;
    - changes in professional practice;
    - lessons learnt during the pandemic;
    - the future of language teaching and learning in HE
  - 2 surveys
    - Teachers' survey: 31 questions, 25% open-ended;
    - Managers' survey: 30 questions, 40% open-ended
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##### **Survey respondents**

- Sent to 365 institutional members and 23 associate members for further dissemination among teaching and management staff;
- Statistics:
  - results of teachers' survey valid with a probability of 99% (confidence level), with a margin of error of +/-5% for the entire population;
  - results of managers' survey valid with a probability of 90% (confidence level), with a margin of error of +/-5% for the entire population
- Response rate:
  - Teachers' survey: 725; Managers' survey: 183;
  - All data anonymised, no data excluded;
  - Responses from all institutional members and almost all associate members, well distributed range of respondents;



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European Confederation of Language Centres in  
Higher Education

Europäischer Verband der Hochschulsprachenzentren

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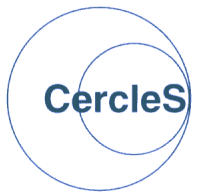
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- In both surveys, some of the institutional members are overrepresented, others underrepresented;
- Top respondents in descending order by country:  
Teachers' survey: UK, Italy, Germany, Spain, Switzerland  
Managers' survey: UK, Germany, Spain, Italy



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## B. Main findings

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### Changes in professional practice

- **Support by university and management:** In general, teachers and managers rated the support in a similar way. Managers felt less worried about hardware than teachers. Both teachers and managers felt that there was not much relief from other duties. Less than half of both groups' respondents said they experienced encouragement and recognition. **Support meetings followed by peer training** were mentioned as the **default forms of team support for both teachers and management**. In some cases, no support was offered.
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- **Coping with challenges: Coping with an increased workload, coping with stress and uncertainties** and the **lack of knowledge about online teaching** were identified by both teachers and managers as the most difficult to deal with. The **online support organised by peers and the online support about remote teaching offered by the department** were mentioned as the **most useful resources**.
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- **Format of teaching in summer 2020:** Online remote teaching was mentioned by 84% of the respondents as the format of teaching adopted in summer 2020, followed by 19% of respondents naming web-enhanced face-to-face teaching. Both synchronous and asynchronous hybrid teaching and blended learning were selected by very few respondents. (Respondents could choose more than one answer.)
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- **Learning outcomes:** The largest proportion of respondents (66.3%) reported that they were confident learning outcomes could be attained. The qualitative answers showed that teachers managed to have students reach their goals after redesigning the teaching materials and learning environment.

I moved all my materials to Moodle. I created some extra materials to make it possible for students to do online remote classes. I assessed the process and the products. We had no problems achieving outcomes.

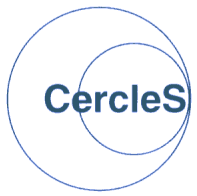
One third of the respondents felt that the outcomes were partially reached. This response needs further research since "partially reached" could mean "not reached".

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- **Change of relevant rules and regulations:** Respondents were asked to choose between six statements and could choose more than one. Teachers responded that the main changes concerned work conditions, followed by overall workload and attendance requirements. Managers also identified work conditions as the most important change, but followed by attendance requirements and the number of students per class. The comments by teachers illustrated their experience as follows:

**Classroom sizes were not reduced.** Language teaching that is primarily conducted in video conferences in large groups (20 or more students) is just ridiculous. Workload (preparing additional material for online teaching, but also digitally grading homework) increased enormously.

I think the most significant change was **work conditions** because we decided to be much more connected with the students outside the class, via WhatsApp and telephone calls. To this day students can write private messages to me and the goal is to be as accessible as possible. That of course increases the amount of time I put into each course.



**Numbers increased** as the remote option allowed out-of-region students to attend classes more easily; teaching duties changed enormously e.g. all corrections especially of exams online as well as coping with uploading large numbers of digital documents to exam files and archives; the overall workload at least doubled as all the teaching material had to be adjusted to the online format, digital textbooks were not available and Moodle exercises and information were needed on a constant basis; emails from anxious students abounded.

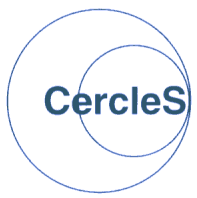
It was only natural that we were advised to try to **offer technical assistance and/or extra care** for those **students** who seemed unable to properly take part in our classes from either the emotional toll of the pandemic, or from having legitimate technical difficulties, including insufficiently developed skills when using the teaching platforms we were advised to use at university level. I also made sure to adapt to my students' apparent needs and preference for those online tools that seemed to yield the best results; in other words, flexibility and creativity proved to be of paramount importance.

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- **Leadership practice:** the managers reported in the reflective comments the high number of online meetings, the introduction of flexible working hours and the fact that leadership became observable. Central university central **management:** respondents mentioned the centralised management through COVID-19 taskforces and technical support (dissemination of information; communication and networking patterns). No complaints about top-down management were reported.

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### Lessons learnt – Teachers

- **Remote synchronous teaching in comparison to face-to-face teaching:** Most of the respondents ranked the increase in workload as the most appropriate statement characterising the change due to moving to remote synchronous teaching, followed by the reduced effectiveness of breakout rooms and the less than positive impact on group dynamics.
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- **Impact of the newly acquired mode of delivery on the development of language skills:** According to the respondents, speaking was most affected in a negative way, followed by listening. Between 31% and 67% of the respondents did not define either a positive or a negative impact in relation to the development of specific skills. These answers need more investigation.
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- **Impact of asynchronous remote learning:** According to 39.8% of the respondents, asynchronous remote learning was helpful when applied in the flipped classroom mode, and for 44.4% it was helpful when a variety of exercises and tools were employed. For both statements, almost one third of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed and this point, therefore, needs more investigation
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- **Favourite teaching pattern:** 31.1.8% of the respondents chose group work as their favourite teaching pattern, followed by 27% who chose pair work and 25% who chose classroom work. Individual work was chosen as the favourite pattern by only 14% of the respondents. (More than one answer was allowed.)
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- **Assessment and learning outcomes:** 65.2% of the respondents indicated that assessments had to be modified. However, less than 50% of respondents indicated that this presented a problem. 40.4% mentioned that validity and 32.7% that reliability was compromised while in 36.4% cases, the assessment criteria were adapted. Quite a number of respondents, however, neither agreed nor disagreed with the necessity of change (29% relating to validity, 27.4% relating to reliability and 22% with regard to the change of criteria). These answers need further investigation. 38.6% of the respondents felt that the learning outcomes were comparable to those before the pandemic.
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- **Students' commitment:** 39.9% of respondents disagreed that students showed less commitment in their self-study tasks than before the pandemic, whereas 24% agreed with the statement. One might conclude that the motivation of students does not seem dependent on the mode of delivery. On the other hand, 37% neither agreed nor disagreed that students showed more commitment in their self-study tasks. These answers need further investigation.

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## Lessons learnt – Managers

- **Changes to teams as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic:** Most of the respondents did not mention major changes to the composition of their teams, but identified minor changes in the programmes: 27% of programmes had a smaller number of courses available and 16% of programmes had more courses available. However, more stress was ranked as the most important statement, followed by the experience of more solidarity and support among staff. On the other hand, the statement that it was more difficult to supervise the quality of teaching was ranked third.

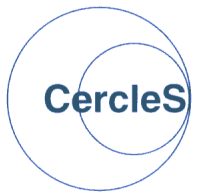
- **Changes in leadership:** 85% of respondents thought that all the important messages were successfully communicated to staff, even if they worked remotely, with 89% of respondents thinking videoconferencing is a suitable way to communicate with remote teams (and only 61% of respondents thinking the same of phone calls).  
**However:** 81% recognised that working remotely has had an impact on communication with staff and 77% recognise that social distancing has also had an impact.  
When asked about ways to contribute to team spirit, 50.7% of respondents do not agree or do not know if virtual social events are an effective way to contribute to team spirit.  
⇒ *Since previous responses showed that stress was identified as the major change affecting staff, it would be interesting to follow up which alternatives managers tried out to approach this.*  
For some managers, videoconferencing improved communication since more staff could be present at the meetings, which seemed to be more focused and the relevant recordings can be an additional benefit. Many respondents also said that they did not organise social virtual team meetings. Some respondents had quite negative views about virtual social meetings for two main reasons: 1) after spending a lot of time online, virtual social events were not attractive 2) for some, virtual social events were a chore rather than fun.  
The lack of informal meetings, common coffee breaks and 'water-cooler' chats were lamented by many respondents.  
Among the numerous comments (99), some statements illustrate shortcomings of virtual informal meetings:

Staff have become less social as they have experienced screen fatigue. Virtual drinks have been less well attended than real-world drinks for instance. Staff feel the loss of more informal opportunities to socialise.

We had known each other for many years and probably that fact has made things easier. But I find it quite hard with new teachers. I think face-to-face meetings and frequent contact are necessary and can't be replaced by Zoom meetings.

Most of the respondents asserted that they could offer support to staff with family duties by allowing more flexibility, adjusting the timetable, offering the option of home office and the mode of delivery, and easing deadlines and requirements. Some respondents reported extra support such as childcare and reduced workload. Several respondents mentioned the importance of offering moral support.

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- **Support by the department / university:**  
Several respondents stated that their **university** offered **services**, such as seminars on well-being / mindfulness, online sports classes and psychological support. In some cases, additional support was mentioned, such as regular updates by the president (Vice-Chancellor, Rector), the provision of COVID-tests, staff vaccinations and small gifts.



Several respondents mentioned that their **Language Centre** took care of staff by providing additional equipment and offering regular and effective communication as well as fostering a supportive environment, organising virtual coffee breaks and/or virtual or campus-based Christmas Parties and sending out postcards and small gifts. A very small group of respondents reported that they received no support at all.

## The future of language teaching and learning

### ▪ Job perspective:

The majority of both teachers (64%) and managers (72%) see the future of language learning and teaching positively, whereas 24% of the teachers do not know and 12% report a negative assessment of their future. Among the management staff, a smaller percentage mentioned that they did not know (22%) and only 5% had a negative assessment of their future.

Among the total of 685 comments by **teachers**, the following topics were mentioned (by frequency):

The future of language teaching and learning:

- Language skills will be important in the future too!
- Language Centres are being positively challenged to diversify their services and adapt to new realities and student needs;
- Newly acquired teaching skills are positively assessed, seeming to be helpful in coping with future challenges, also in face-to-face settings;
- Blended learning and hybrid learning are also positively perceived as helpful means of coping with future challenges (inclusion, motivation of students).

Working conditions (job security, workload):

- The extra workload with little support and the fear of losing their job were mentioned.

Financial aspects:

- The fear of cuts and of whole institutions closing down were reported mainly by respondents from two specific countries.

Among the total of 172 comments by **managers**, the following topics were touched upon (by frequency):

Support for Language Centres and financial challenges

- Language Centres may not get (more) (financial) support;
- Language Centres may have to generate even more income.

Recognition:

- Recognition / Rewards by University authorities for the Language Centres' efforts and innovative coping with the challenges of the pandemic cannot be expected;
- Language Centre management has to make themselves heard at wider university level.

Potential for development:

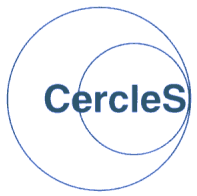
- New offerings may serve as a showcase of best practice;
- Exploiting the new possibilities like blended learning and virtual exchanges.

Team skills and development:

- Quick peer learning is perceived as an encouraging experience.

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- **Future teaching practice- teachers:** Almost 65% of the respondents are in favour of offering remote synchronous or face-to-face teaching depending on the nature of the language course. 51% of the respondents reported that they are in favour of courses offered in hybrid mode, but 31.9% said that they would like to go back to pre-COVID-19 teaching. In the numerous reflective comments (212), the respondents explained their views:

- ein **Präsenzunterricht** erscheint mir im Sprachunterricht unerlässlich (Berücksichtigung nonverbaler Signale, Einbeziehung des gesamten Kurses, Möglichkeiten differenzierten, stärker abgestuften Feedbacks, Möglichkeit zum Schaffen einer "echten" Gruppe...

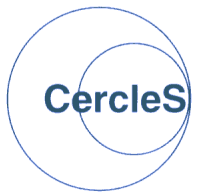


- El **formato presencial** desde luego SIEMPRE será el mejor, ese contacto visual (ahora mismo muy relevante), y la gesticulación de toda la expresión de la cara son muy importantes para el desarrollo y mejor percepción de lo que contamos y comunicamos, sin ello ....falta algo MUY IMPORTANTE.
- **Les cours de langues ne sont pas que des cours de langues.** Il est peu préférable de s'engager trop précipitamment dans la voie online car les échanges sociaux sont primordiaux pour les étudiants ainsi que les enseignants. Un juste milieu serait idéal avec 80% sur place et 20% cours online synchrone (cours avancé)
- **What a waste of time, energy and expertise it would be to go back to how teaching was done pre-COVID!** Teaching offers should be more diverse, flexible and build on all the tremendous efforts and digital resources made the past years.
- Some courses would benefit from a **hybrid format**, if the content necessitates it (e.g. inviting special guest speakers from abroad; having multiple speakers in a class, communicating with students from further afield...).
- Although I would welcome the idea of introducing **hybrid courses**, I think enough time needs to be allowed to prepare for **this**. I can imagine that it would involve almost as much work as it did to transform our classroom teaching into the digital format.
- **COVID-19 has shown 3 things:**
  1. There are many new teaching formats possible that we used, even with current technology.
  2. There are even more approaches imaginable - both online and F2F - if we had the technology, the framework and the courage to try them. The pandemic, for all its sad effects, gave us a chance to take a step back and realise this.
  3. Nothing beats physical encounters. With all the new opportunities that we may have discovered, we should never ever hope for remote teaching or remote collaboration to become the rule.

#### ▪ **Future service development – managers**

57.1 % of the respondents expect that the pandemic will have a long-lasting impact on Language Centres' services. 42.5% expect that universities will further develop commercial language learning services. Aligned with the expectation with regard to their future job situation, only 21.3 % of the respondents feel that the university will reward Language Centres' performance and expertise in remote teaching and only 35% expect the universities to support the Language Centres' innovative teaching and offer appropriate support. In their reflective comments (39), some respondents expressed the view that Language Centres need to be more pro-active:

- I do not believe our University is particularly interested in supporting what we do explicitly, or in rewarding us for what we do. They just expect us to get on with it! It will be up to us to capitalise on the changes that have taken place for our own sake and that of our learners.
- It is important that Language Centres in HE raise their voice and develop initiatives and a new practice without expecting support from their universities in the first place.
- Our Language Centre's success and further innovation will be up to us, not the university.



### C. Challenges

Based on a first analysis of the findings, the CercleS working group identified the following challenges for stakeholders in the field of post-pandemic language teaching in Higher Education:

- To develop guidelines and define the criteria for different modes of delivery in language education;
  - To negotiate with the university executive boards good conditions that are necessary to carry out efficient and sustainable language teaching (strategic and personnel planning, technical support);
  - To offer training for sustainable online and hybrid teaching;
  - To maintain and develop international collaboration between LCs in HE (e.g. virtual exchange, staff exchange, virtual international classroom).
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### D. Further action

After organising the webinar of 30 June to promote the main outcomes of the survey, the CercleS working group is engaged in the following activities:

- August – October 2021:
    - Drafting a report; ✓
    - Carrying out the next steps of analysis (correlations, comparison between data with regard to the country of origin of the respondents, deeper analysis of dynamic texts);
    - Offer quantitative and qualitative data per country to National Associations for further analysis and dissemination;
  - Write an article in the CercleS Journal, *Language Learning in Higher Education (LLHE)*, issue 11.02 ✓ (to be published in October);
  - Organise a workshop for teachers: identify future challenges: 15 October → develop guidelines and training;
  - Organise a workshop for managers: policy paper on the future of language teaching and learning in Higher Education: 19 November.
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### CercleS Study Working group

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